

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Maurice Denis (Granville 1870 - Paris 1943)

Les Mois de Marie

Oil on cardboard.

Signed with the artist's monogram MAVD at the lower right.

264 x 335 mm. (10 3/8 x 13 1/4 in.)

This oil sketch is closely related to, and may be a preparatory study for, Maurice Denis's large painting of *The Virgin and Child in a Spring Landscape*, signed and dated 1907, formerly in the Henri Aubry collection in Paris and today in the Yamazaki Mazak Museum of Art in Nagoya, Japan. The main difference is that in the present work the figures surround a statue of the Virgin, while in the painting the statue is replaced by the seated Virgin and Child. The landscape depicted in both painting and sketch is the hillside of Mareil, near Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

The composition of this oil sketch is also related to *The Madonna*, one of four panels of the decorative scheme entitled *Eternal Spring*, painted in 1908 for the dining room of the villa of Denis's patron Gabriel Thomas at Meudon. The murals remained in situ until the death of Thomas's grandson in 1986, and are today in the Musée Départemental Maurice Denis in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The painted panel, like the present sketch, depicts nuns and young communicants gathered around the Virgin and Child in a landscape, although unlike the oil sketch it is vertical in format.

A stylistically similar, rapidly-executed oil sketch on cardboard by Maurice Denis, today in a private collection, is a study for *The Oratorio*, part of the lost decoration entitled *Eternal Summer*, painted in 1905 for the music room of Kurt von Mutzenbecher in Wiesbaden in Germany; a project which seems to have inspired the *Eternal Spring* cycle for Gabriel Thomas three years later.

The present work belonged to the artist's daughter, the poet Anne-Marie Poncet-Denis (1901-1994), who sold it to a private collector in 1962.

Provenance:

The artist's studio, and by descent to his daughter Anne-Marie Poncet-Denis, Vich

Acquired from her by a private collector in 1962

Galerie Paul Vallotton, Lausanne (no.3809)

Anonymous sale, Paris, Christie's, 1 December 2006, lot 67

Private collection, Europe.

Artist description:

Arguably better known as a theorist and critic than as a painter, Maurice Denis began his career as a member of the group of young artists known as the Nabis. Formed in Paris in 1889, the Nabis artists - including Paul Sérusier, Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel and Félix Vallotton, who were all at the beginning of their careers - were united by a desire to develop a new, more expressive pictorial language in which form and colour were as important in their own right as subject matter. Denis was established as the leading theorist of the movement, and published a large number of articles in avant-garde reviews. After around 1900, however, Denis's work became more classicizing in manner. He exhibited at the Bernheim-Jeune, Le Barc de Boutteville and Druet galleries, the last becoming his primary dealer in 1904. In 1908 he purchased a villa (called 'Le Silencio') in the fishing village of Perros-Guirec on the northern coast of Brittany, where he worked for the rest of his career. Much of Denis' finest work is in the form of large-scale decorative murals, commissioned both for private houses - such as those of the Prince de Wagram, Etienne Moreau-Néaton and Ernest Chausson in Paris - and public buildings. One of the most important examples of the latter is the History of Music cycle in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on the Avenue Montaigne in Paris, decorated by Denis in collaboration with Vuillard and Roussel in 1912.

A fervent Roman Catholic, Denis found particular inspiration in Biblical imagery and subject matter, and religious works occupied much of his later career. Indeed, in 1919 he was instrumental in establishing the Ateliers d'Art Sacré; studios that trained young painters in the principles of religious painting and decoration, as well as producing designs for mosaics, stained-glass windows, church furniture and ornament. Denis also produced a large number of book illustrations and lithographs.